Incarnational geographies? The faith-inspired praxis of ‘Living Amongst’

Submitted by Samuel Christopher Thomas to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Human Geography in September 2012

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Abstract
Despite a resurgence of religion in the provision of public welfare and care, geography has only recently begun to make sense of this public phenomenon (Kong, 2011). In keeping with recent calls to allow religion to ‘speak back’ to geography (Yorgason & Della Dora, 2009), this thesis presents a re-reading of one particular arena of Christian faith-praxi in socio-economically deprived neighbourhoods across the UK. Much of the literature on faith-based organisations has so far focused on service-provision and political advocacy roles adopted by faith-motivated groups, and there has been little, to no, acknowledgment of re-emergent forms of ‘incarnational’ mission. Incarnational approaches differ from mainstream service-provision in the sense that faith-inspired individuals and organisations come to permanently ‘live amongst’ marginalised people and places, rather than physically serve from a distance. This thesis seeks to address this lacuna in the literature by critically assessing the faith-inspired praxis of ‘living amongst’, and developing a socio-temporal and ethical account of ‘incarnational geographies’.

Drawing upon ethnographic research with one Christian incarnational FBO, this thesis investigates the historical development of the FBO and the experience and practices of staff and volunteers who relocate to live in one particular socio-economically deprived neighbourhood of Greater Manchester.

In contrast to essentialist academic accounts of faith-praxis that might present ‘living amongst’ as either a form of self-betterment (see Allahyari, 2000) or proselytisation (see Woods, 2011), this thesis argues that ‘incarnational geographies’ need to be re-read as complex, emergent and performative landscapes that often involve a reconfiguration of purpose and praxis through proximate participation.
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